

Psychological Operations in Bosnia

Lieutenant Colonel Thomas K. Adams[®]

NATO forces used low-intensity nuclear weapons when they conducted air strikes on Serb positions around Sarajevo, Gorazde and Majevica in 1995.

— Serb anti-NATO propaganda broadcast, September 1997

The lion's share of attention within the special operations forces (SOF) community often goes to SOF's commando-like aspects—raids, rescues and the like. However, SOF in Bosnia have found little scope for these activities. Instead, the less glamorous psychological operations (PSYOP) efforts have often taken the lead and, in so doing, may be pointing the way to the future of special operations.

The summer and fall of 1997 brought an increasingly acrimonious power struggle between opposing political leaders in the Republika Srpska (RS). When a faction led by anti-NATO hard-liners began inflammatory broadcasts attacking the NATO-led Stabilization Force (SFOR) and the *General Framework Agreement for Peace* (GFAP), it became necessary to counter these broadcasts with factual information. SFOR and its American-led component, Multi-National Division (North) [MND (N)], conducted PSYOP to promote peace using US Air Force EC-130E *Commando Solo* broadcast aircraft and information leaflets developed by US Army civil affairs and PSYOP personnel.

As in most areas where operations other than war (OOTW) occur, there were few public communication means in Bosnia-Herzegovina, including both the federation and the RS. News magazines were non-existent and newspapers were few, expensive and had limited circulation. Thus, broadcast media were extremely influential, especially the small number of television transmitters still functioning. This became important when a factional dispute threatened to destabilize the elected RS government. One faction, supporting former Serbian leader and indicted war criminal Radovan Karadzic, began using the limited television facilities to oppose the GFAP, NATO and the elected government. The broadcasts, for example, routinely referred to Bosnia's Muslim leader as "Alija Izetbegovic, Muslim murderer."¹

The *Commando Solo*

Airborne Broadcast Platform

The EC-130E could perform airborne psychological broadcast missions in the standard AM, FM, high frequency, television (TV) and military communication bands. Missions were flown at maximum altitudes to ensure optimum propagation patterns. Highly specialized modifications had been made to the latest EC-130E variant, including enhanced navigation systems, self-protection equipment and the capability of broadcasting color television on a multitude of global standards throughout the TV VHF/UHF ranges.

Three Air National Guard EC-130Es were deployed from the 193d Special Operations Wing, Harrisburg,

Pennsylvania, to a base in Italy, an hour flight across the Adriatic Sea from Sarajevo. This was a direct response to persistent hostile Bosnian-Serb radio and television propaganda from the Karadzic faction.

Operating from Brindisi, Italy, the EC-130Es were equipped with high-power transmitters for TV, AM and FM radio broadcasting. The planes could also operate as jamming devices against Bosnian-Serb hard-liners' TV and radio broadcasts or simply overpower their signal, blasting them off the air and replacing them with other programs. The aircraft executed three test flights over Bosnia-Herzegovina in September, testing radio broadcasting equipment as a nonviolent "show of force" by SFOR. The aircraft successfully broadcast programs from the SFOR radio station "MIR" (peace) without disruptions.

Despite the efforts of both the High Representative and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the dissident RS faction repeatedly refused to cease or moderate their broadcasts. The international community took direct action. Under GFAP authority and orders from the NATO Council and the Office of the High Representative, SFOR seized four RS transmission towers.

This reduced but could not eliminate the offending broadcasts because all broadcast media in the RS were state-operated, and SFOR was neither willing nor prepared to control the entire Serbian radio and TV system. In mid October, unidentified elements inside the RS sabotaged television transmitters, taking the legal government's programming off the air in much of eastern RS. The Karadzic faction explained that the lack of normal programming was due to "illegal" SFOR actions.

Shortly afterward, SFOR used EC-130Es in a live mission to transmit on a frequency normally used by Bosnian-Serb TV, explaining that the absence of normal programming was due to actions by the Bosnian-Serb leadership.

Leaflets and Local Media

During the same period, the MND-N inaugurated a parallel, supporting information program to counter Serb broadcasts. The division commander appeared on local television outlets, both live and by videotape, to counter the anti-NATO and anti-SFOR broadcasts. However, much of eastern Bosnia was beyond range of these stations. Air-distributed leaflets were a medium of communication that could reach this audience. The leaflets were prepared by PSYOP soldiers, who sought to give them an educational tone. These products stressed such themes as the role of officials in a democratic society, especially the role of police as enforcers of the law rather than political police. Other leaflets presented the facts concerning international aid and GFAP enforcement.

These leaflets were distributed from helicopters over key cities and towns in the American-led peacekeeping zone in northeastern Bosnia and adjoining areas. This included every major Serb-held area in northern Bosnia, where anti-NATO and anti-GFAP broadcasts were

being made by the state-run media. About 43,000 leaflets were distributed from the air and by soldiers on the ground. The leaflets presented information about democracy and responsible government, quoting democratic thinker icons which included Thomas Jefferson, John Locke, Plato and others. For example, one leaflet quoted Locke: "The end of law is, not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom." Another cited Jefferson's advice: "When a man assumes a public trust he should consider himself as public property." Ironically, given the Serbs' historic distrust of anything German, a third quoted Immanuel Kant: "The only stable form of government is where the rule of law reigns and does not depend on any person."²

PSYOP Support

Emerging from two generations of authoritarian leadership, the former Yugoslavia made shallow soil for the seeds of democracy. Traditionally, the most important civil police role was to ensure political compliance and stamp out dissent. Therefore, developing a democratic tradition, community-based police force was critical to promoting responsive, representative government at all levels. Guiding this process was the job of the International Police Task Force (IPTF), a UN entity composed of civilian police officers from numerous nations. During the 1997 municipal elections, it was critical to ensure that the local national police supported the electoral process, rather than interfered with it.

MND(N) psychological operators assisted the IPTF in implementing the GFAP. These officers monitored and occasionally helped Bosnian police maintain order on election day. IPTF personnel had freedom of movement privileges through SFOR checkpoints. Under the GFAP's Annex 11, IPTF was responsible for monitoring and advising police (upon request) on polling places' security. Additionally, the IPTF monitored to ensure that electoral regulations were strictly followed in the vicinity of polling places, particularly those regulations dealing with political activity, freedom of movement and access and the posting of political propaganda. They also attempted to remedy election security regulation violations by bringing them to the attention of local police officials, the LEC and other appropriate authorities.

IPTF operations were hampered because members lacked investigative or enforcement powers and could only counsel and advise local police. Thus, IPTF officers depended greatly on developing rapport with the local police and population to promote cooperation and indirect influence. PSYOP soldiers also assisted, promoting their credibility through leaflets prepared in Serbo-Croatian for general distribution in areas where the IPTF was active, explaining their role under the GFAP.

The IPTF operation monitors, advises and trains local police forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Their specific responsibilities included:

- Supervising the operations of local police in providing for public security.
- Restructuring local police forces and reorienting their approach from communist-style public control

to democratically based public service.

- Coordinating training of local police in community policing and support of democratic principles.
- The IPTF was not intended to be a substitute for local police, but rather to assist local police forces in developing their own effective law enforcement capabilities. In fact, the IPTF distributed leaflets explaining their role in the communities.

The IPTF is currently playing a critical role in restructuring federation and RS forces: candidates for the federation cantonal police have been tested and are being vetted for their permanent appointment to the new Federation's police force. The IPTF Assistance Program includes the following responsibilities:

- Monitor, observe and inspect law enforcement activities and facilities, including associated judicial organizations, structures and proceedings.
- Advise law enforcement personnel and forces.
- Train law enforcement personnel.
- Facilitate, within the IPTF's mission of assistance, the parties' law enforcement activities.
- Assess threats to public order and monitor the law enforcement agency's capability to deal with such threats.
- Advise governmental authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina on the organization of effective civilian law enforcement agencies.
- Accompany the parties' law enforcement personnel as they carry out their responsibilities.

Lessons Learned

This article explains how the use of standard, doctrinal PSYOP methods and materials to meet nonstandard needs in a nontraditional situation can foster positive relations with the general public to build trust and confidence and educate the public on the role of international organizations in the execution of an international agreement. Additionally, the EC-130 *Commando Solo* proved its worth many times in operations from Haiti to Bosnia. The tense situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina has shown the system's versatility and importance in various stability and support operations. Likewise, the general public gained an appreciation for the IPTF at work in their communities.

NOTES

1. Tracy Wilkinson, "Trying to Extract War From Journalism," *Los Angeles Times* (26 October 1997), 12A.
2. *Ibid.*

Lieutenant Colonel Thomas K. Adams, US Army, Retired, is a political-military affairs writer. He received a Ph.D. from Syracuse University, and is a graduate of the National Strategy course and the US Army Command and General Staff College. He is the author of numerous articles on military-related subjects as well as two books, US Special Operations Forces in Action and the forthcoming Post Industrial Warfare. He has held various command and staff positions during a period of service that extended from Vietnam to Bosnia. As a special operations officer, his assignments ranged from counterinsurgency to humanitarian assistance and counterdrug missions.